

RICHARD WATTS - FINAL REPORT: JAMES M. JEFFORDS FUND 2019 GRANT

PUBLIC POLICY STORY-TELLING – REPORTING VERMONT

BACKGROUND

In this project we created the **Community News Service** – a team of students providing in-depth local news coverage to community newspapers in Vermont. The program had two goals, give students hands-on learning opportunities and provide local content at no cost to Vermont’s struggling local media outlets.

See <https://www.communitynews.net/>

Funds from the James M. Jeffords Center provided the spark that launched a successful journalism effort that continues to grow.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Here is a summary of what the funds enabled and what exists today.

The beginning: Summer 2019

We started in the summer of 2019 with five students and a professional editor, Lisa Scagliotti, who had spent about 25 years as a reporter and editor at different newspapers. With Lisa acting as the Editor and liaison, students wrote stories for *The Other Paper*, *Shelburne News* and the *Citizen*. Lisa consulted with the editors of those papers, then assigned and edited students work. Along the way, students received a crash course in news writing, interviewing and reporting.

We created a website -- [Communitynews.net](https://www.communitynews.net/) -- to showcase student work. The site contains photos and bios of students and links to their articles as well as links to our partner publications.

By the end of the summer we met the goal of 20 local stories, ranging from coverage of a [new shrimp farm in Charlotte](#) to [high school graduations](#). Several of the student’s stories were also published in *VT Digger*, an on-line media outlet distributed monthly to 300,000 readers. For example, a story by Caroline Slack broke news on the first spotting of the [Emerald Ash Borer in Addison County](#).

Students also experimented with audio story-telling, writing and recording. For example a team of students published a story about the [landscape and soundscape of Mt. Philo State Park](#). Students also learned about photography as they illustrated their stories, see for example [this story on the Bobolink](#) by Julia Bailey-Wells.

Project continues: Summer and Fall 2020

James M. Jeffords funds jump-started an idea that has continued to grow. In the summer of 2020, 12 students participated and we added several more collaborator papers. This fall more than 20 students will participate in the Community News Service. Lisa Scagliotti, our first editor, has gone on to start a new media outlet in Waterbury, the [Waterbury Roundabout](#). Taking her place this fall is UVM graduate, Cory Dawson who recently completed a Masters’ in Journalism.

We have created new partnerships with the *Charlotte News*, *Essex Reporter*, *Hinesburg Record*, *Waterbury Roundabout* and started a new media outlet in Winooski -- [The Winooski News](#) – a community that has not had local news in 25 years. Our students have created websites and electronic newsletters for [Winooski](#), [Hinesburg](#) and [Waterbury](#).

We have also worked with students and faculty at Castleton University and Northern Vermont University to grow this project statewide and publish stories in local papers in northern and central Vermont.

EDUCATION

Students have learned about local government and about reporting. By being deeply engaged in their local beat, students have a greater understanding of local government and public policy at a micro level. And they have seen how stories of statewide significance often start in a small community.

Academics and Co-Curricular Education: The project was coordinated with UVM's new minor in Reporting & Documentary Storytelling (RDS), designed to provide hands-on storytelling opportunities for students interested in reporting and journalism. Students in the Community News Service received credit towards the minor.

COLLABORATORS

We collaborated with many media platforms in creating this, including *VT Digger*, The Vermont Community Newspaper Group, the *Charlotte News* and the *Hinesburg Record*. This fall we are adding *Vermont Public Radio* and the O'Rourke Media group (*Essex Reporter*, *Colchester Chronicle*, *Milton Independent*) to our list of collaborators.

NEWS STORIES AND LINKS

[**Boston Globe: Community News Service in Vermont**](#)

[**Seven Days: New Reporting Program**](#)

[**Program expands to Castleton: Seven Days**](#)

[**Program expands to Waterbury**](#)

[**Program expands to Winooski**](#)

CONCLUSION

Funding from the James M. Jeffords Center led to the creation of the Community News Service that has expanded from five students to more than 20 and from three partner publications to about 12.

And the funding is directly leading to supporting local news gathering, helping make communities more vibrant and giving students some essential training and experience in storytelling, reporting and local democracy.